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ABSTRACT

These two documents address the issue of dealing with blame for farm families in crisis. The first document, for the adult student, discusses how and why people blame each other, with emphasis on the current farm financial crisis. It is noted that blaming occurs primarily at the anger and depression stages of the loss cycle and that, when losing the family farm, farmers can feel blame coming from the community, from relatives with a love of the land, from spouses, and from the farmer himself. It is suggested that farmers can avoid feeling blame by realizing that factors beyond their control led to the crisis and by supportive interpersonal relationships. The second document is a leader's guide for a workshop which attempts to lift the shame and guilt from farming individuals and families who are being blamed. Four activities are described including the following: (1) a discussion activity to accompany the videotape "Dealing with Blame"; (2) an activity and worksheet on understanding blame; (3) an activity and worksheet on interpersonal behavior and communication; and (4) an activity and worksheet on avoiding blame in farm families. (ABL)

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Dealing with Blame

CG 019197

Help for Farm Families in Crisis

It's natural to look for someone or something to blame when things are not going well or when we are hurt or threatened. For example, persons threatened with the loss of the family farm may find their anguish eased a bit if they can find a place to put the blame. This publication looks at how and why people blame each other, with emphasis on the current farm financial crisis. We will discover how to avoid blame that hurts us and the people we are blaming, and how to handle self-blame and being blamed by others.

Understanding Blame

The act of blaming may stem from a need to understand a difficult situation. Somehow it's worse to feel that the world has gone topsy-turvy for no reason than it is to point fingers at the "cause" of the problem. We think that if we can find out who's to blame, we may have some control over the outcome and over our own feelings.

When adjusting to a loss or a threat of loss, most people go through several stages of the "loss cycle": shock and denial, anger, depression and withdrawal, willingness to talk, and acceptance. Only after the acceptance stage comes the return to meaningful life. People vary in the ways they move through these emotional stages and how long they spend at each stage. Sometimes we become stuck on a certain level and are unable to progress through the cycle.

Blaming occurs primarily at the anger and depression stages. It's only natural to feel anger when the farm, which has meant so much in the past and held so many hopes for the future, is in danger. It's important to remember, though, that while blame and anger are natural human emotions, they do not help in solving problems. We must move beyond blame, through each stage of the loss cycle, if we are to get on with the business of living.

Who Is Blaming?

Where loss of the family farm is concerned, blame can come from many directions—from the community, from relatives, from the spouse, and from within oneself.

The Community Blames

Lots of blaming and finger pointing are going on at the community, state, and national levels. When people say that it's only "poor managers" who are losing their farms, they are blaming the farmers themselves. These blamers apparently are ignoring the effects of the national economic situation including U.S. international trade policies, high interest rates, and the high value of the U.S. dollar in foreign markets. Also local loan policies, high land prices during the late 1970s, and bad weather in several recent years have taken their toll.

The above factors and others are beyond the individual farmer's control. Therefore, it is both unhelpful and inappropriate to label all those in difficulty as poor managers who are to be blamed for their own problems. The fact is that many different kinds of farm operations are in trouble—good managers and bad, large and small. Some were previously affluent; others have experienced many years of limited income. The group in trouble includes young, middle-aged, and older farmers.

Prepared by Virginia Molgaard, extension specialist in family environment, Iowa State University.

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When local and national leaders minimize the problem by saying that the present farm situation is the farmers' fault, the farm family, which is already hurting, feels even more hopeless and discouraged.

The Extended Family Blames

It is even more painful when blaming goes on within families. Many farm families today are in danger of losing farms that have been in the family for three and four generations. There is a love of the land itself, as well as a commitment to farming as a way of life, that makes it painful for the whole family when financial crisis threatens the future of the farm.

It is extremely hard for the older generation to witness the loss of the farm that they and their parents were able to hold onto through the Great Depression. Many older family members are remembering how they survived by economic measures such as gardening and canning, home butchering, sewing their own clothing, and finding leisure activities that didn't cost money.

What these people ignore are the major differences between these times and those of 50 years ago. One difference is that during the 1930s almost everyone was hurting financially. Now, some farmers and many nonrural people are doing very well economically and there is a tremendous gulf between farmers who are losing everything and their well-to-do neighbors or relatives in town.

Another major difference is that it's no longer possible to live on garden produce and a barter economy because of huge overhead expenses such as electricity and high interest on large loans. And children can no longer go barefoot in patched overalls to the neighborhood one-room school.

There are several reasons, then, that older family members have trouble dealing with their children who may be "going under." The older family members may be in pain from seeing the younger generation in danger of losing the family farm. Also, parents may have loaned money or cosigned loans for their farming sons and daughters, and perhaps have lost some or all of their savings for retirement. The fear of parents for their own future may be a frustration that is expressed through blame.

However, the guilt that many young and middle-aged farmers are already experiencing is made even worse when they are blamed by the older generation. Many farmers today who are losing family farms feel like failures who have betrayed a generational trust. At this point there may be little that they can do to win in the struggle to keep the farm, and the blame they feel from the older generation may lead to severe depression and lack of hope for the future.

Spouses Blame Each Other

The story goes that when the boss is feeling grumpy he yells at the employee who goes home and yells at his wife. The wife, in turn, gets after the child, who then kicks the cat. The point is that it's easy to take out frustration with those closest to us. In a family that is in danger of losing the farm, everyone is apt to feel hurt, angry, and frightened. It's natural to point the finger of blame. Something is wrong and it must be someone's fault.

Symptoms of loss, such as anger and depression, make spouses' nerves raw; and irritability is a natural result. Just when husband and wife need each other most, each person's own painful feelings make it hard to be understanding and sympathetic.

One reason for blame and guilt is that spouses may be at different stages in the loss cycle. For example, the husband may be in the depression and withdrawal stage while the wife is still angry and blaming. In that case, the husband may feel that she doesn't care about him and his feelings. The wife, on the other hand, may feel that the husband isn't trying hard enough or has given up.

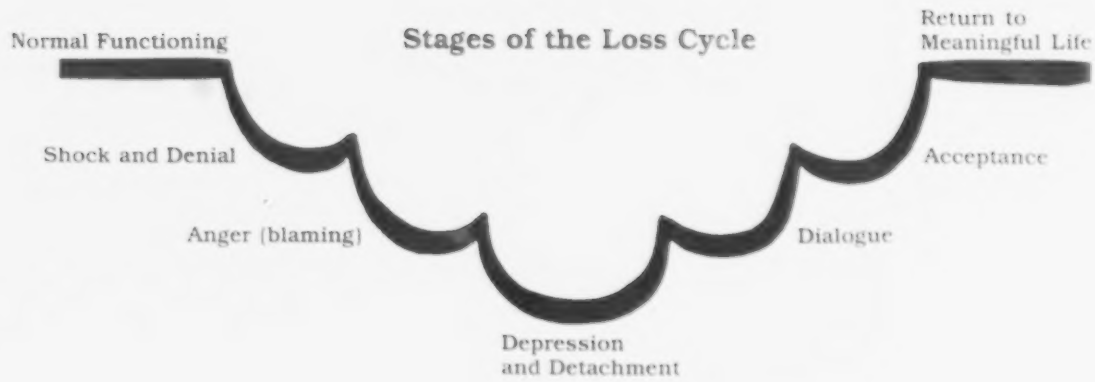
In another family, the wife may have reached the stage of acceptance and is trying to make realistic plans for the future. She may feel unsupported by a husband who is denying that there is a problem or is too depressed to do anything. It's easy to blame a spouse who's not feeling what you're feeling.

It may be helpful for couples to remember that it's unlikely for both people to be in the same stage at the same time. In fact, the situation may be even worse if both husband and wife are in the same stage, such as depression, and are unable to act or give support to each other.

Husband-wife blame might happen when the farmer stays awake at night trying to figure ways to cut corners on the farm operation. He may begin to blame his wife for spending more than he thinks she should on food, clothing, and other family expenses. Blame might also occur if the wife has brought land into the marriage. It might be easy for her and her family to blame the husband who has had direct responsibility for the farm operation. Or, a husband or wife might blame the spouse who urged buying a piece of land or machinery.

Farmers Blame Themselves

"We're losing the farm and I'm the one who's been in charge. It must be my fault." After the stage of anger and blame against others, farmers



may begin to blame themselves—to feel guilt and failure. Others, especially those who have been taught that it's bad or sinful to be angry, skip the anger stage and go straight to the depression stage. They immediately blame themselves when there is trouble. These people tend to ignore the fact that problems may have been due to factors beyond their control. Instead, they play the "if only" game: "If only I hadn't bought so much land . . . If only we hadn't borrowed money from Dad . . ."

While some self-blame is natural, the intensity of guilt feelings and the length of time they persist can create a real problem for both the individual and the rest of the family. It is probably fair to say that the biggest reason for suicidal thoughts and feelings, particularly in the present rural crisis, is the sense of intense guilt and failure on the part of the farmer or another family member. Stories of those who jumped out of office building windows in 1929 and the early 1930s remind us of what lengths people may go to when they are caught in the stage of depression and self-blame.

Avoiding the Blame Trap

There are ways to escape from the misery of self-blame or the hurt and anger of feeling blamed by others. Just as the willingness to talk with others is the way to move out of the loss cycle, giving and receiving support from others is a way to get out of the "blame trap." Here are some ways to begin:

1. Let people in the family know that you are blaming yourself or feeling hurt because others are blaming you. A spouse, for example, may be more supportive of you if he or she knows you are already feeling guilty.

2. If you are the spouse, parent, or other family member of a person who is feeling guilt or sadness, let the person know that you don't blame him or her. Try to tell the person that while you may be feeling anger over the situation, it isn't directed at him or her personally. Sometimes during difficult times, silence by family members can be interpreted as blame.

3. Remind yourself and other about factors beyond personal control that have helped create financial difficulty for farmers.

4. Talk to others in a similar situation. When you visit with a respected neighbor or friend who is also facing possible loss of a farm, you may see that he or she is not entirely at fault. That may help you quit blaming yourself.

5. Remember, "to err is human." Even if a decision turns out wrong, that doesn't mean you are a bad or stupid person.

6. Keep in mind that the future of the farm is separate from the future of you as a person and from that of your family. More and more farm families have faced and lived through the anger and hurt of losing the farm and have gone on to find new jobs and a new life.

Moving Away from Blame

While blame is a natural human emotion, in the long run it doesn't help in solving problems. Blame stands in the way of taking appropriate action. If blame goes on for long, families may miss the opportunity to help each other through what is already a painful situation. One farm couple who learned to stop blaming made this comment: "We may still lose the farm, but at least we've got each other."

Dealing with Blame

Help for Farm Families in Crisis

Leader's Guide Lesson Plan

Objectives

To help farm families understand the blaming process, the feelings involved, and the probable outcomes of blaming.

To help lift the shame and guilt from farming individuals and families who are being blamed. Blaming may be coming from the community/nation, the intergenerational family, spouses, and/or from inside oneself.

To teach nonblaming responses to emotional situations.

Program Segments	Materials Needed	Approximate time (min.)
Videotape	*Dealing with Blame*	22
Discussion of videotape*	P. 2	20
Activity One—Understanding Blame	P. 2, Worksheet One, pencils	35
Activity Two—Using "I" Messages	P. 2, chalkboard and chalk or newsprint and markers	25
Activity Three—Avoiding Blaming for Farm Families	P. 3, Worksheets Two and Three, chalkboard and chalk or newsprint and markers	40
Summary	P. 4	1
	Total time	143 min. (approx. 2½ hours)

Note: You will need to make copies of the three worksheets for all participants.
*Throughout this guide book, leader's instructions are given in italics.

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Show the videotape, "Dealing with Blame."

Discussion of Videotape

Lead the group in discussing the questions below. Total time: 20 minutes. Possible answers are in italics.

1. In the first scene of the videotape what might the wife have been feeling? *Frustration, wanting to get even, blame.* What may have led up to her feelings? *She may have been left out of the decision making in the past.*

2. What did the husband's reaction in that same scene say about his feelings? *He felt frustrated, angry, hopeless, like a failure.*

3. What are the factors contributing to the farm crisis referred to by the sociologist in the film that are beyond the control of farmers? *High interest rates, strong American dollar on foreign market, sliding land prices, federal decisions on social programs.*

4. What influences in the past may make older farmers unable to understand the younger farmer's buying habits? *They farmed in a simpler, less costly way, with less use of large machinery, fertilizer, and herbicide.*

5. What seemed to change the older farmer's feelings about the financial trouble his son was facing? *When he heard about the serious emotional problems of a friend's son.*

6. Why is it no longer possible for farm families to get by if they have their own milk cows, chickens, meat to butcher, and garden produce? *Because of high overhead costs, electricity, price of planting, interest rates, and rent costs.*

7. In the videotape the St. Clairs talked about sharing the news of financial troubles with their sons. Why don't more families do this? *Families may be embarassed to talk openly about money problems. They may not want to burden or worry their children.*

8. What are some reasons that the St. Clairs didn't blame each other? *They made the decisions together. They seemed to be aware of how badly each other was feeling.*

9. What seemed to help the St. Clairs the most during their hardest time? *Getting help from friends who would listen to them.*

After discussion, begin the activities on the following pages. Master sheets to use in duplicating the worksheets are at the back of this Leader's Guide.

Activity One—Understanding Blame

Leader

In order to help understand the blaming process I'm going to ask you to write answers to some questions about situations you have been in. First, think of a situation from your childhood in which you were blamed for something. Use the paper I am going to hand out for your answers. After you write your answers you will be sharing this experience with a partner. Write your answers under the "Situation One" heading. *Pass out copies of Worksheet One and allow five minutes for writing.*

Find a partner, not your spouse, and take turns sharing your answers. *You may want to pair off the group yourself—for example give the group numbers or colors to match to find partners. Sometimes people are hesitant to choose partners on their own. Allow six minutes.*

After about three minutes remind the pairs to switch and allow the other partner to share.

Bring the group together and ask people to describe the feelings they identified. Write on chalkboard or newsprint. Next, ask for volunteers from the audience to describe possible outcomes of the feelings. Allow five minutes.

Next, we'll go through the same process—only this time think of a situation in which you did the blaming. Write answers to the questions under the "Situation two" heading on your paper. *Allow five minutes.*

After they have written, have them go through the procedure of sharing with partners and follow with more group discussion—11 to 15 minutes; total activity time—30 to 35 minutes.

Activity Two—Using "I" Messages

Leader

In the videotape we saw people using different ways of behaving and communicating with each other. Now we will look at a particular situation in two ways. I will describe a situation in which blaming might easily occur:

This morning you were late leaving home for an important appointment in town. Just as you were about to dash out the door you realized that you didn't have your car keys. After a quick search in all the likely places, you remembered that your teenage daughter borrowed your car keys last night. She was at school and you couldn't find the keys in her room. Luckily you remembered a spare set of keys hidden in the garage but by then you were late for your appointment. Now it's late afternoon and you approach your

daughter to talk about your frustration in the morning. What might you say to your daughter if you are blaming her?

Write typical responses from the audience on the chalkboard or newsprint. Encourage responses that place blame and vent anger. Allow five minutes. After you have six to eight responses ask the following questions, allowing five minutes.

1. If you were the teenage daughter, how would you feel hearing comments like these from your parent?

2. What would you think about your parent?

3. What might you decide about your behavior in the future?

4. How will this scene likely affect the parent/child relationship in the future?

Now let's try the situation using good communication skills.

Ignoring the situation and saying nothing may avoid an unpleasant scene, but you need to express your feelings and make plans to avoid a similar frustrating situation in the future. Unexpressed feelings can lead to physical tension and stand in the way of a good relationship.

Good nonblaming communication involves several steps. The first step is sending an "I" message expressing how you feel about the incident or situation. When you describe how you feel, avoid using highly emotional words like "furious" when a milder expression would do. Highly emotional words may tend to put the listener on the defensive.

Now let's think about some "I" messages that express your feelings and describe the situation. Remember, we're not trying to give the whole communication here, just the first part—telling how you felt and describing the situation without blaming.

Wait for several responses from the group. Write those that are appropriate on board/paper. Aim for a statement like, "I felt frustrated when I couldn't find my keys this morning." Allow three minutes.

The next part of the communication involves telling how you were affected by the situation. It's best to stick to specific effects related to the immediate situation, rather than making generalizations about, for example, how "such inconsiderations make my life harder." Let's have some examples of this part of the message to follow:

"I felt frustrated when I couldn't find my keys this morning because . . ."

Wait for several responses from the group. Write those that are appropriate on board/paper. Aim for a statement like, ". . . because I was short on time and I ended up being late for my appointment." Allow three minutes.

The last part of the communication should state specifically and calmly what you would want the other person to do in a similar situation in the future. Again, avoid making generalizations like, "In the future try to be more considerate." Let's have some examples of how to ask your daughter for what you want to do in the future.

Wait for several responses from the group. Write those that are appropriate on board/paper. Aim for a statement like, "Next time you borrow my keys, please return them to the hook by the back door." Allow three minutes.

Now, read the whole sequence of messages that make up the communication, ending up with something like, "I felt frustrated when I couldn't find my keys this morning because I was short on time and I ended up being late for my appointment. Next time you borrow my keys, please return them to the hook by the back door."

As you practice using nonblaming messages, they will become more comfortable. While it takes effort to do something new, it may help to remember that your relationships are worth putting time and energy into. Everyone is happier when blaming is avoided.

Activity Three—Avoiding Blame in Farm Families

Leader

Now we're going to try two different ways of handling a tense situation on the family farm. As we saw on the videotape, blaming comes from many places. Some of the sources of blame are intergenerational relationships, relationships between spouses, and self-blame. We will divide into two groups with one group working on intergenerational blame and one group working on blame between spouses. Later the whole group will focus on how to deal with self-blame.

Divide the group. Form pairs within each group. Hand out Worksheet Two to all the pairs in one group and Worksheet Three to the pairs in the other group.

Read the explanation at the top of your worksheet and answer the questions accordingly. Work with your partner.

Circulate to make sure each pair understands the assignment. After people have had a chance to write blaming statements and finish their worksheets, get the whole group together for discussion. Ask the group using Worksheet Two for blaming statements and then ask for answers to the questions at the bottom of the page. Possible answers include:

1. The older couple may lose: (a) savings, (b) the land that has been in the family, (c) a farming future for grandchildren.

2. They may feel frightened, sad, hopeless.

3. The younger couple may feel depressed, like failures, angry, hopeless.

4. They may lose a close, warm relationship with their son's or daughter's family. They may be planting seeds of serious depression in their child or spouse. They may be blocking productive problem solving and decision making.

5. The older couple can let the younger folks know how sad and worried they are. They can recognize the difference between the way things were in the Depression and how things are now.

Jot down responses on board/newsprint. Total discussion time—10 minutes.

Next, ask for blaming statements from the group who worked on Worksheet Three. Then have volunteers read the "I feel" statements they wrote.

Examples:

Husband: "I feel worried when you spend money for a new outfit. I'm trying to stretch the dollars on the farming end of things. Please talk it over with me when you're thinking of spending money for things that are not essential."

Wife: "I feel frustrated when you act depressed and don't talk to me because I want to be in on things and help out. Please let me know what's worrying you so we can work it out."

Total discussion time—10 minutes.

Leader
Now let's brainstorm as a group about what might help a person who is feeling blamed or blaming him/herself. I'll ask some questions and write your answers here on the board (or newsprint).

First, what parts of the local and national economy help to cause financial trouble for farmers?

Possible answers: Federal export policy, strong dollar on foreign markets, high interest rates, dipping land values, today's high cost of farming, low prices, weather.

Where can a depressed person go for help?

Possible answers: Talking to friends and neighbors, talking to family members, joining self-help group, seeing a supportive minister or counselor.

What can a person who is blaming him/herself do to feel better on a day-to-day basis?

Possible answers: Get some physical exercise every day, eat a balanced diet, take time for a hobby or leisure activity where he or she can accomplish something or have fun.

Summary

Leader
Blaming is a natural response during hard times. But, underneath the blaming there are many other feelings. Stopping to think of the frightened and sad feelings that those who blame may feel can help us understand and feel less at fault. Realizing the facts outside of our control that are responsible can also help lift the blame. Above all, reaching out to other people and accepting their support can make all the difference.

Dealing with Blame—Worksheet One

Situation One. Think of an experience in your childhood in which you were blamed for something.

Situation:

Who blamed you?

How did you feel?

Outcome or result of the situation:

Situation Two. Think of an experience when you blamed (or felt like blaming) someone.

Situation:

Who did you blame?

What other emotions did you feel underneath the blaming?

How would you have felt if you didn't blame the other person?

Outcome or result:

Dealing with Blame—Worksheet Two

Older couples who have been farming for many years often have strong feelings when the family farm, now managed by the son and his wife or daughter and her husband, is in trouble. What kinds of things might this older couple think or say (at least to each other) that find fault with the younger couple and their management of the farm and home? Write some "blaming statements" in the space below.

1. What does the older couple have to lose if the family farm goes under?

2. What feelings besides anger and blame may they be feeling?

3. How will the younger couple probably feel if they are blamed?

4. What may happen as a result of the older couple's blaming?

5. Are there any constructive things that the older couple can do instead of blaming?

Dealing With Blame—Worksheet Three

Husbands and wives often end up blaming each other when the future of their farm is threatened. Pretend that you are the husband or wife in this situation. In the space below, write down statements you might make (or thoughts you might have) that blame your spouse.

Now construct a nonblaming statement as we did in the activity about the lost keys.

1. Make an "I feel" statement. "I feel . . ."

2. Name the situation. ". . . when you . . ."

3. Tell how you are specifically affected. ". . . because . . ."

4. State what you would like to see in the future. "From now on, please . . ."

Now, write out the whole statement using the parts above.

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